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U.S. Intelligence in the Dark About Andropov

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 28 — Government officials said today that Western intelligence agencies were in the dark about the reasons for the absence of Yuri V. Andropov, the Soviet leader.

"There is intense interest at the highest levels here on Andropov," one State Department official said. "This has led many analysts to write all sorts of stuff that obfuscates the one sentence on which they would all agree: We just don't know."

An intelligence specialist on the Soviet Union said:

"No matter what you may read, the truth is that no one really knows what has happened to Andropov. It is a weird comment on that country that such a prominent man can be out of action since late August or late September — we are not even sure of that — and no one has a sensible, coherent explanation."

A Central Intelligence Agency official said that there was no "inside dope, just a lot of speculation."

There have been various reports that Mr. Andropov is suffering from respiratory, circulatory or kidney ailments, that he is disfigured, crippled or mentally disturbed, one official said, "and none of it can be verified."

A State Department policy-maker said: "The whole experience of trying to track Andropov has been a sobering reminder that that bloody place is a total secret. It is absolutely terrifying to me that a group of people have in their hands the capacity to destroy mankind and we know virtually nothing about them."

The last time Mr. Andropov was seen in public was on Aug. 18 when he was visited by nine American senators, who then said he seemed in good condition. Film clips of the meeting were shown

on Soviet television.

Mr. Andropov told the senators that he was about to go on vacation in the Crimea, the traditional summer vacation area for Soviet leaders.

On Sept. 28, Tass, the Soviet press agency, said he had conferred with Ali Nasser Mohammed al-Hassani, the President of Southern Yemen. The location of the visit was not given and no photographs were published.

About a week later, intelligence officials said, it was reported from Bulgaria that Mr. Andropov would visit there on Oct. 25. But there was no customary official announcement a week or so before the visit, leading to speculation that by mid-October he was incapacitated. Soviet officials said he had a bad cold.

Western diplomats in Moscow said that they saw his limousine and security escorts driving from his apartment house to the headquarters of the Central Committee in late November, leading to speculation that he was better. But no one actually saw Mr. Andropov himself.

About that time, the date for a session of the Supreme Soviet, the nominal Parliament, was announced for Dec. 28. This led to speculation that he must be well enough to attend the event, which was to approve the 1984 budget and economic plan, and the Central Committee meeting that precedes it.

In early December, Armand Hammer, the industrialist, who has good personal relations with the Soviet leaders, went to Moscow, thinking he would meet with Mr. Andropov. But when he arrived, he was told that he was not

able to see him. Likewise, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, the Prime Minister of Canada, planned to go to Moscow to see Mr. Andropov, but was told that he was not receiving foreign visitors.

Officials said they were unsure whether Mr. Andropov had recovered from his earlier incapacity and was planning a more vigorous schedule this month when he was again stricken, or whether he has been suffering throughout with the same problem.

"We have gone over the possibilities, and have come up with nothing solid," one intelligence official said. "Some have said that he may be disfigured somehow, paralysis, or an accident."